MTSA Regulations found at 33 CFR
Parts 26, 161, 164, & 165—Automatic Identification System Rule

Q.   What is the Automated Identification System (AIS)?

Ans.   Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) technology relies upon global navigational positioning systems, navigation sensors, and digital VHF radio communication equipment operating according to standardized digital communication protocols that permit the voiceless exchange of navigation information between vessels and shore-side vessel traffic centers. This information is continually updated, in near real-time, and, received by all AIS-equipped ships and shore stations in its vicinity.

Q.   What types of information is made available by the Automated Identification System and what are the advantages of installing the AIS?

Ans.   The AIS provides mariners with accurate navigation information, such as:
   - Static Information—Vessel call sign, name, IMO identification number, dimensions, type;
   - Voyage-Related Information—Draft, cargo type, destination, and estimated time of arrival; and
   - Dynamic Information—Time in Universal Time Coordinated, latitude/longitude position, course over ground, speed over ground, heading, rate of turn, navigational status.

In addition, shore stations will be able to relay pertinent navigational data from other sources, such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Physical Oceanographic Real Time System (NOAA-PORTS).

The advantage of an automatic and continuous exchange of information is that all can access it, since it is digital data it can also be tailored to the mariner's needs and desires, and will greatly reduce voice radio exchanges. In addition, the AIS enhances the mariner's situational awareness, permits more effective and reliable passing arrangements, and provides the Coast Guard with a comprehensive and informative traffic image not possible with radar or video surveillance.

Q.   What is the Automated Identification System Rule (AIS)?

Ans.   The Coast Guard has developed rules applicable to both U.S. and foreign-flag vessels that require owners and operators of certain vessels to install and use the AIS. The AIS rule is issued under the Maritime Transportation Security Act of 2002 (MTSA) and is part of the international effort to increase the security and safety of maritime transportation. See 33 CFR parts 26, 161, 164, and 165.

Q.   Who is affected by the Automated Identification System Rule?

Ans.   Owners and operators of U.S. or foreign-flagged vessels in commercial service
        who meet the applicability provisions are affected. Generally these include:
        - Vessels on international voyages that are:
            o Self-propelled commercial vessels of 65 feet or more in length, other
              than fishing vessels and small passenger vessels certificated to carry
              150 or fewer passengers.
            o Tankers.
            o Passenger vessels that are over 150 gross register tons.
            o Vessels, other than passenger vessels and tankers that are over 300
              gross register tons.
        - Vessels operating within Vessel Traffic System areas, that are:
            o Self-propelled commercial vessels of 65 feet or more in length, other
              than fishing vessels and small passenger vessels certificated to carry
              150 or fewer passengers.
            o Towing vessels of 26 feet or more in length and more that 600
              horsepower.
            o Passenger vessels, regardless of gross register tonnage, certificated to
              carry more than 150 passengers for hire.

        The terms herewith are as defined in 46 USC 2101, unless noted in 33 CFR §
        164.46. Note: the term fishing vessels does not include fish processors or tender
        vessels. See 33 CFR, Part 164.46.

Q: When must the Automated Identification System be installed on vessels?

Ans: SOLAS vessels must install the AIS as specified in the SOLAS implementation
        schedule maintained by the International Maritime Organization. Non-SOLAS
        vessels on an international voyage and vessels within a Vessel Tracking System
        (VTS) Area must install the AIS by 31 December 2004.

Q: If a fishing vessel has a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) that provides vessel
        identification and location data, is the VMS an acceptable substitute for the AIS?

Ans: No, it is not. The AIS and VMSs are different systems with different purposes.

Q: How much will the Automated Identification System cost?

Ans: The Coast Guard estimates that the initial cost will be $9,330 per vessel, with
        continuing costs of $933 per year over a 10-year system life.

Q: Is the Coast Guard considering requiring the Automated Identification System for domestic voyages outside of VTS areas?

Ans: The Coast Guard is considering this, and accepted public comments on this issue through December 2003. These comments appear in Docket USCG-2003-14878 and will be considered as we move forward with additional AIS requirements.

Q: How will the Automated Identification System help to increase security?

A: The Coast Guard believes that the AIS will improve security by increasing the Coast Guard's awareness of vessels in the maritime domain, especially vessels approaching U.S. ports. The AIS provides positive identification of vessels not available through voice radio communication or radar.

Q: Are there alternatives to the Automated Identification System rule for small businesses?

Ans.   No. There are no special provisions or alternatives in the AIS rules for small businesses.

Q.   Does the installation of the Automated Identification System require additional equipment in order for the AIS to operate properly?

Ans.   Not all AIS units are able to broadcast position, course, and speed without the input of an external positioning device (e.g. dGPS); the use of other external devices (e.g. transmitting heading device, gyro, rate of turn indicator) is highly recommended, however, not required except as stated for certain vessels as required under the Safety of Life at Sea Convention Chapter V, Regulations 19, as stated in § 164.46(a)(2). Note: since AIS is digital data, it may be displayed and integrated into a wide range of devices (e.g. Electronic Charts Systems, Radar, Automatic Radar Plotting Aides (ARPA), personal computers, etc.).

NOTE: More complete information on the Automatic Identification System rules can be found at http://www.navcen.uscg.gov/enav/alnm/ais_standards.htm .